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Use of Disclosures

Administration Often Unveils Secrets, At Risk to Security, for Sake of Policy

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WASHINGTON, June 1 — The Reagan Administration has been following a pattern of disclosing highly classified information to support its foreign policies, even though a number of Administration officials say these disclosures have endangered intelligence sources and methods. This fits the well-established practice of its predecessors, with two important variations: In the memory of a number of past and present officials, the Reagan team does it more often. And this Administration has been more aggressive in threatening the news media with prosecution for conveying similar intelligence information to the American people.

This has set off a struggle between press and government over what intelligence data should be made public and who should decide. William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, once again highlighted those issues with more threats to the press last week concerning coverage of the trial of Ronald W. Pelton, a former official of the National Security Agency who is accused of spying for the Soviet Union. By the week's end the White House had moved to soften the threat somewhat.

Today, in separate television interviews, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, while supporting the view that journalists who break the law on disclosing intelligence secrets should be prosecuted, called for voluntary restraints and appeals to journalists' sense of responsibility.

While the Administration's thrust has been to bear down on the press, with frequent warnings in recent weeks, its own role and reasons in divulging such information have received scant attention.

As Representative Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, put it: "Every administration wants to have it both ways — to keep its secrets, and to reveal them whenever doing so is useful for their politics and policies." The Wisconsin Democrat, a former Intelligence Committee member, added that in his judgment a number of Administration disclosures have been "more damaging to our gaining necessary information than the press disclosures the Administration is complaining about."

Administration disclosures include revealing the most sensitive communications interceptions in the recent case of Libya and the Soviet Union on a number of occasions, as well as releasing satellite photographs regarding Nicaragua in 1982.

The disclosures also include an incident last year in which the Central Intelligence Agency offered the press detailed information provided by one of the highest-ranking Soviet defectors of recent times.

Testimony at Spy Trial

Last week the disclosures entailed a Federal prosecutor, for the first time using information supplied by the United States intelligence community, speaking in a spy trial of the general American capability to "exploit," "process," and "analyze" Soviet messages.

In each instance, according to Administration officials, intelligence officers and others have argued against disclosure on the ground that adversaries, knowing they were being seen and heard, could take steps to block these processes in the future.

To some Administration officials and others, these authorized disclosures have been more damaging to intelligence collection than the unauthorized press disclosures of recent weeks that have so exercised Administration leaders. These include press accounts of the details of Libyan messages after President Reagan had talked publicly about the substance of those messages regarding terrorist activities in Berlin.

Of the greatest concern to the Administration were reports that an American spy had told Moscow that United States submarines were involved in listening to Soviet communications, information presumably already in Moscow's possession.

When to Go Public?

Nonetheless, the weight of opinion expressed by officials of past and present Presidential administrations is that the one in power has the right to decide when intelligence must be compromised to advance policy.

"I've always been of the view that an administration has to be able to make the judgment when to disclose, even if intelligence people are opposed," said McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's national security adviser. He recalled Kennedy's decision to reveal satellite photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1963 as a legitimate exercise of this right.

Stanfield Turner, a retired admiral who was President Carter's intelligence chief, went further, saying that "we always have to make compromises" in balancing intelligence sources with policy considerations. But, he said, it is "impossible to make this judgment from outside the Government."

Both maintained that the press had the right to publish unclassified information. But Admiral Turner insisted that the press then had to accept the right of prosecution.

In 1982, the Administration made public aerial reconnaissance photographs that intelligence officials said proved Nicaragua, with Soviet and Cuban aid, was assembling the largest military force in Central America and was supplying Salvadoran guerrillas. At the time, a senior Administration official said: "It's a no-win situation. If we go public with the information, we may lose our ability to continue collecting in the field. If we don't, we may lose our chance to build public support for the policy."

As it turned out, according to officials, the Administration neither lost its intelligence access nor convinced many of the extent of the military threat. But the photographs might have been useful to Soviet intelligence.

In 1983, after the Soviet Union shot down a Korean airliner, killing 269 people aboard, Secretary Shultz revealed that American listening posts had intercepted the radio conversations between the Soviet pilot and his controllers.

The disclosure may have failed to prove his point that the Soviets knew the plane was not an intelligence aircraft and, as far as many intelligence officers were concerned, told Moscow that the United States could intercept important Soviet military communications.

The Case of the Defector

In late 1985, the Central Intelligence Agency made a determined effort to tell reporters details about their interrogation of Vitaly S. Yurchenko, a key Soviet intelligence agent who apparently defected and then slipped out of American control and returned to Moscow. The C.I.A. told its side, as some of its officials acknowledged at the time, to show that he had been a valuable informer, contrary to White House assertions of his uselessness.

A number of Administration officials at the time maintained that these C.I.A. disclosures tipped off Moscow to what Mr. Yurchenko had divulged, in the same way that Mr. Casey is seeking to prevent the press from telling Moscow and the American public about Mr. Pelton's alleged disclosures.

Earlier this year, Mr. Reagan publicly spoke of the Administration's knowledge of messages sent to and from Tripoli and its diplomatic posts. He said these proved Libyan involvement in the terrorist attack April 5 against a discotheque in West Berlin, in which two people were killed and 230 others wounded.

Several intelligence officials thought the disclosure would allow the Libyans to prevent similar interception in the future.

As to the decision to make disclosures at the Pelton trial, Edward P. Djertjian, a White House spokesman, said last week that it was "made by appropriate Government authorities after careful consideration of the demands of trial and the potential harm that release of this selected data may cause the national security."